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Best Practices for Empowering K-2 Students in High-Poverty Schools

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Best Practices for Empowering K - 2 Students in High-Poverty Schools

By Hadyn Jolly

INTRODUCTION

This document has been created to expose today's educators in high-poverty K - 2 classrooms to different strategies and ideas that can help them generate greater student success and deeper learning. All of the suggestions come from peer-reviewed sources, and they have been separated out by related topic below. Hopefully, these applicable recommendations will benefit you and your students.

GENERAL PEDAGOGY

- ▶ Adopt "a 'whatever it takes' mentality." Be accessible to students, and make sure they know that you are willing to go the extra mile to help them succeed. Actually be willing to go that extra mile, too. (Popp, 2011, p. 287)
- ▶ Ask yourself "What can I do to change your path?" Think about how you can influence students to succeed and break free from cycles of poverty. (Merrill, 2013, p. 69)
- ▶ Assess using authentic methods, as well as "student reflections, interviews," and discussions. (McKinney, 2013, p. 809)
- ▶ Frequently "engage in modeling and explanation to teach students strategies" before requiring them to perform these tasks on their own. (Taylor, 2013, p. 3)
- ▶ Plan lessons that concentrate on "making meaning, rather than on memorizing facts." Challenge students to problem-solve and answer open-ended questions, instead of just recite back information. (Popp, 2011, p. 287)
- ▶ Figure out "students' strengths and needs" as soon as possible at the beginning of the school year so that you "can begin instruction with actual, not assumed, student ability in mind." (Chilla, 2007, p. 13)
- ▶ Incorporate a lot of "collaborative experiences" into your classroom, like "labs, demonstrations, and debates that promote academic conversation and knowledge building." (Lesaux, 2012, p. 81)
- ▶ Have "flexible and dynamic grouping" in all small groups. Do not allow students to get stuck in a lower or higher reading group. (Adler, 2001, p. 618)
- ▶ Offer students "choice and control over activities." (Kennedy, 2010, p. 386)
- ▶ Ask lots of "high-level questioning," meaning questions that do not just have one right answer. (Taylor, 2013, p. 4)
- ▶ Have discussion be a central feature of your classroom. Students should be talking more than you. (Fisher, 2007, p. 34)
- ▶ Lead "think-alouds" where you model your thought process for students. (Fisher, 2007, p. 35)
- ▶ Have students recite classroom procedures "using the important concept words with emphasis on time, order, and sequence." Model "common classroom routines (e.g., entering the classroom, snack, tidy-up time) and always finish by writing the steps on the chalkboard as the students recall the routine." (MacDonald, 2010, p. 410)
- ▶ Generate "opportunities for students to share their learning with and assert their place in the community." (Peck, 2010, p. 402)
- ▶ "Have students track in a journal a list of the new words they learn. Ring a bell or celebrate as a class when a student uses a new vocabulary word correctly in class." (Izard, 2016, p. 31)
- ▶ Use visuals to help students understand. Have a sketchbook or large paper ready so you "can write down exactly what they're asking," clarify what to do, and provide examples. (Morehead, 2007, p. 97)
- ▶ Develop students' short-term memory skills by having a daily practice of "number sequences and words making sentences and telling a story." To do so,

“give students a set of numbers such as from 1-20. Have someone begin by naming one of those numbers. A second person repeats the number called out by the first person, then adds his own number, which cannot be a consecutive number.” Repeat the process. (Izard, 2016, p. 29)

- ▶ “Ask for their feedback very often,” checking in to see if the classroom and lessons are working for students. Take their advice when it is given. (Morehead, 2007, p. 89)
- ▶ “Model and encourage adept diction.” Carefully plan to change words around the classroom, like student jobs, as the year goes on into more “sophisticated labels.” (Lane, 2010, p. 366)
- ▶ Organize time for students to “learn from each other” and review concepts together after you teach them. Encourage them to act like teachers themselves and help their classmates. (Gallagher, 2011, p. 156)
- ▶ Integrate art instruction into your classroom. Allow students to have “active formative and summative self-assessment through discussions and writing about their work in progress as well as finished art.” Give them chances to practice giving others feedback as well “through weekly class and peer-to-peer critiques.” (Cunnington, 2014, p. 3)
- ▶ Use “students’ test scores to see what we can do to help build upon strengths and improve their weaknesses.” (Follman, 2010, p. 86)

RELATIONSHIPS

- ▶ Converse with students “about their short- term (classroom) and long-term (life) goals” as much as possible. Use these ambitions to maintain motivation and engagement by reminding students of their reasons. (Hagelskamp, 2012, p. 17)
- ▶ Give students the chance to write about their trauma for 15 minutes for at least 4 consecutive days. (Izard, 2016, p. 30)
- ▶ Ask parents about what makes their child wonderful, what their strengths and weaknesses are that they want you to help their child with, and what you can do to make it a successful year. (Gallagher, 2011, p. 119, 120, 121)
- ▶ Have a “daily good morning and welcome song,” as well as other “songs, chants, and poems” that students can memorize and recite together. (MacDonald, 2010, p. 410)
- ▶ “Develop a customized support plan for every student.” Become familiar with how they are “across four domains (academic, social/emotional/behavioral, health, and family),” and then connect them to “appropriate school- and/or community-based services and enrichments.” (Walsh, 2014, p. 709)
- ▶ Ask students to elaborate on their feelings if they say they are bored or are acting apathetic. Say things like, “When did you first become aware of this feeling?” (Izard, 2016, p. 33)
- ▶ Instruct students to “say hello to the person sitting to his or her left and to say something to described this person in a positive way” during morning meetings. (Lane, 2010, p. 363)
- ▶ Visit your students’ homes at the beginning of the year. (Gallagher, 2011, p. 113)
- ▶ Ensure that your students know that you like them. Take interest in their personal lives outside of the classroom, and be a caring source of encouragement and love. (McDermott, 2000, p. 16)
- ▶ “Have calm and quiet management styles, provide quiet reminders of appropriate behavior, and encourage students to maintain self-control in the classroom.” (Popp, 2011, p. 276)
- ▶ Ask students what they think should be done if they come to you about a problem. Give them the chance to “figure it out on their own.” (Gallagher, 2011, p. 127)
- ▶ Tell students stories about yourself frequently so that they can see you “as a person.” (Morehead, 2007, p. 90)
- ▶ Foster “classroom spaces where students think about, compose, and share narratives about who they are and are becoming vis-à-vis science and mathematics.” (Varelas, 2012, p. 334)
- ▶ Spend time in the communities where your students live. Visit community centers and familiarize yourself with how their lives operate. (McDermott, 2000, p. 18)

SOCIAL SKILLS

- ▶ Teach your students to practice gratitude daily. (Izard, 2016, p. 27)
- ▶ Offer explicit instruction on “how to respond in

challenging situations, perseverance when tasks became difficult, and learning how to work with others.” (Hambacher, 2013, p. 164)

- ▶ Give students bubbles to blow if they need to relax. (Izard, 2016, p. 32)
- ▶ “Ask students to identify the emotions that might have been going on in a historic person’s mind” during important times in their lives. (Izard, 2016, p. 27)
- ▶ “Create a bulletin board with the names of the various emotions to be taught.” (Izard, 2016, p. 29)
- ▶ Model the skills needed for success in the real world, like how to “communicate with colleagues,” dress appropriately for work, and hold themselves with confidence. (Hambacher, 2013, p. 171)
- ▶ Have a “calming corner where there is a box of objects that can serve to calm a student and help him regain composure.” (Izard, 2016, p. 26)

LITERACY

- ▶ Block out a 90 minute block every day for reading instruction. (Kennedy, 2010, p. 386)
- ▶ Have a “weekly ‘teacher book-selling session’ in which you do a quick sharing of about 10 to 12 books” to make students want to read them. (Gambrell, 2011, p. 174)
- ▶ Incorporate “reciprocal teaching, literature circles, peer-response groups, partner reading, and Readers Theatre” into your lessons. (Fisher, 2007, p. 37)
- ▶ Get students to read texts repeatedly for different reasons over time to

increase fluency and familiarity. (Teale, 2007, p. 732)

- ▶ Mark specific goals in books for children to read to in a period of time so that they have a clear objective. (Fowers-Coils, 2016, p. 102)
- ▶ Mix in “sequencing activities, reviewing word families, word play, and word attack” to your lessons. (Fowers-Coils, 2016, p. 111)
- ▶ Discuss the nuances of vocabulary with students, like different definitions for the same word and other “cognitively challenging activities.” (Carlisle, 2013, p. 1383)
- ▶ Ensure that students have ample access to a wide variety of “quality age-appropriate books.” (Kennedy, 2018, p. 721)
- ▶ Have “one-to-one instruction” through reading and writing conferences while other students work independently. (Cunningham, 2006, p. 383)
- ▶ “Take 3 or 4 minutes for students to turn to a partner to do a ‘quick share’ about what they have just read” after independent reading time. (Gambrell, 2011, p. 176)
- ▶ “Focus on metacognitive aspects of literacy” like self-checking, positive self-talk, and reflection. (Kennedy, 2010, p. 386)
- ▶ Set up a pen-pal program where students can discuss assigned books with others. Have a “process approach to writing in order to compose the letters.” (Teale, 2007, p. 732)
- ▶ Give students the chance to record themselves reading, listen to it back, and reflect on their skills. (Fowers-Coils, 2016, p. 105)
- ▶ Use “hands-on, color-coded vocabulary manipulatives,

questioning strategies, graphic organizers to teach word consciousness, and even word dramatization activities” to develop vocabulary. (Scott, 2009, p. 340)

- ▶ Utilize “popular culture print examples” that students are familiar with in their home environments to maintain engagement. Incorporate popular character names into “provided Play-Doh cards, writing cards, letter cards, puzzles, matching games, and letter tubs.” (Vera, 2011, p. 319)
- ▶ Direct students’ attention frequently to “books and print (e.g., morning message, shared writing of class stories, labels, signs).” (MacDonald, 2010, p. 411)
- ▶ Provide explicit “academic language instruction” that is anchored in academic texts. Model the use of academic language regularly. (Lesaux, 2012, p. 81)
- ▶ “Use three different instructional actions during a book-reading lesson” to help students gain new vocabulary. State the meaning of the word, provide an example of how it can be used, and then ask students to use the word in their own sentence. (Carlisle, 2013, p. 1365)
- ▶ “Have students keep a ‘reading diary’ of what they read during self-selected reading time. Encourage them to reflect on what they have read and write for 3 minutes about how the material connects to their own lives.” (Gambrell, 2011, p. 173)
- ▶ Give students the time for lots of “active reading practice.” (Taylor, 2013, p. 4)
- ▶ Allow students to choose an activity after independent

reading: "a visualisation, three questions, make connections, inferences, or interesting words." (Kennedy, 2018, p. 722)

- ▶ Include silly poetry and graphic novels into your instruction. (Fowers-Coils, 2016, p. 101)
- ▶ "Engage students through text and discussion about real issues they face." (Patterson, 2007, p. 36)
- ▶ Have book groups that focus on "thematic elements and student leadership in discussions." (Taylor, 2013, p. 22)
- ▶ Utilize "texts that allow students to be both reflective and connective" through being relatable to their own lives. (Patterson, 2007, p. 35)
- ▶ Refrain from limiting yourself to one single reading ideology. "Pull from a variety of reading programs to meet student needs." (Adler, 2001, p. 618)
- ▶ Assign lots of "reflective responses that allow students to connect to their learning and visualize themselves as part of a larger discourse community." (Patterson, 2007, p. 36)
- ▶ Encourage language development through using the "language experience approach, interactive writing, and write-alouds." (Fisher, 2007, p. 35)
- ▶ Use "brainstorming and think-pair-share" to develop discussion strategies. Use "questioning, compare and contrast, predicting, and graphic organizers" to develop comprehension strategies. (Connor, 2010, p. 483)
- ▶ Explain to students "why they needed to practice reading," and always provide them with a

purpose. (Fowers-Coils, 2016, p. 102)

- ▶ Create a book as a class where "popular culture characters were used as the characters in the story" based on a published book. Use the same strategy with "nursery rhymes and songs." (Vera, 2011, p. 320)
- ▶ Design lesson plans that allow students to "use literacy for real purposes and audiences, e.g. to communicate their points of view, to take a stand, to engage in solving real world issues and problems." (Powell, 2017, p. 96)

SCIENCE

- ▶ "Involve learners in scientific practices such as argumentation, explanation, scientific modeling, and engineering design." (Krajcik, 2007, p. 3)
- ▶ Make students feel like they are scientists by encouraging them to think, write, read, and socialize like real-world scientists. (Varelas, 2012, p. 332)
- ▶ Set aside at least an hour block for students to participate in "collaborative pair and group work" to "investigate topics of personal interest within thematic inquiry-based science units." (Kennedy, 2018, p. 718)
- ▶ Give each student a binder as a scientist notebook for them to keep their "observation records, lab worksheets, resource materials, and other handouts." (Connor, 2010, p. 476)
- ▶ Design lesson plans to provide opportunities for students to practice "how scientists build, evaluate, and apply scientific

knowledge." Connect their "science understanding to learners' experiences with the everyday world." (Krajcik, 2007, p. 3)

- ▶ Engage students in "observing, testing, describing, and designing." (Varelas, 2012, p. 323)
- ▶ Integrate other content standards into the instruction of science, like "the use of text and comprehension strategies." (Connor, 2010, p. 484)

MATHEMATICS

- ▶ Give lots of opportunities to "use mathematical representations, reflect in a mathematics journal, or practice using mathematics games." (Tapper, 2009, p. 74)
- ▶ Ask students open-ended questions to allow their learning to be "inquiry driven" and "participatory." (McKinney, 2013, p. 799)
- ▶ Take the time to "activate prior knowledge" at the beginning of every lesson. (Tapper, 2009, p. 67)
- ▶ Make math lesson explicitly connected "to real-world experiences" and use "problem-based learning and manipulatives." (McKinney, 2013, p. 809)

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Hadyn Jolly

Senior Honors Project Reflection

For my Senior Honors Project, I wanted to do research on something that was meaningful to me. I wanted to have a purpose in my project that that not just fulfilling a requirement for the honors program. I knew that I wanted to do research, because one of the craziest things about being a teacher is how much information there is out there about education. So many people post their ideas, lesson plans, and handouts online. However, after being involved in our UP School of Education program, I now know that many of these things that you can buy on Teachers Pay Teachers or find on a Pinterest board are not backed by actual meaningful pedagogy. Handouts where all children produce the same outcome are not effective at fostering deep connections to material that is presented or generating the skills that are needed to be successful in the modern world, like problem solving and inventing. People may try to cover up the lack of meaning with lots of bright colors and kid-friendly graphics, but ultimately they are not of good quality when it comes to positively changing learning outcomes.

While this still leaves an abundance of education-based journals and professional articles, these are more burdensome for regular classroom teachers to access. Furthermore, they typically talk a lot about theory and not about what teachers can actually do in the classroom to apply these ideas. Most teachers also honestly do not have the time to read gigantic papers to see if they actually suggest any feasible strategies to help their students during the day-to-day. Quite frankly, they also are not getting paid enough for that. Therefore, many end up taking the easier route and succumbing to the handouts and lessons that they can quickly find online, which may look great and seem beneficial, but do not actually provide any genuine, meaningful learning for

students. For today's stressed educators who want to do what's best for their kids but don't know how, I wanted to make this document. I wanted to make a dent in this problem. It is as much for my future self as it is for other teachers.

When the time came to get the ball rolling, I met with my faculty advisor, Dr. Eric Anctil, to narrow down a topic and figure out what I was going to generate as a result of my research. I decided on the title "Best Practices for Empowering K-2 Students in High-Poverty Schools." I decided to focus specifically on K-2 classrooms because that is the age group that I am hoping I will get to teach in. This age is so crucial for success later in life because the brain is so moldable and big strides need to happen in its development during this time, especially in regards to reading. The biggest gaps in knowledge typically come from this age, and once these children get older it becomes even harder and harder for them to catch up. Furthermore, since I wanted to focus on specific classroom strategies, the types of things that can be done in classroom instruction vary greatly between age groups, so I wanted to narrow down the span.

I also decided to research high-poverty schools in particular because eventually I would like to teach in these kinds of environments. It breaks my heart that so many children are essentially screwed (for lack of a better word) from the get-go, not receiving what they need to pull themselves out of poverty and have lives that are different than those of their parents. Furthermore, educators in high-poverty contexts are more likely to experience students with behavior problems and other struggles that make teaching more difficult, leading to teacher burn-out. I'm sure that it's also very easy to succumb to hopelessness if you feel like you're doing all you can for these precious kids but they're still not succeeding. Hopefully, using strategies that are actually research-supported could benefit not only students, but teachers as well.

I told Dr. Anctil that I therefore did not want to write a huge research paper, because that would not achieve what I intended on doing. That kind of document would be too complex and long for most actual teachers to dig through and gain anything from. So, I set out to write an article of possibly around 5 pages, chock full of different ideas and applicable strategies for educators to read and gain insights from that could positively influence their pedagogy and, subsequently, their students. I would do the hard work for them in finding sources that are reliable and informational, and they could take away the main ideas that are effective, relevant, and actually achievable in their classrooms.

I did all of my research online, searching scholarly sources to find papers that were related to my topic. I made sure that they were at least within the last 20 years and were peer reviewed. I would have tried to only get articles that were more recent, like the last 10 years or even 5 since the education world can change so quickly, but I simply could not find enough sources during only those times to create the kind of document that I wanted. To be quite honest, it was harder to find peer-reviewed articles and dissertations on this subject than I thought it would be. The internet is absolutely brimming with teacher bloggers; if I Google-searched what I had been looking up in scholarly databases, I probably would have found hundreds if not thousands of articles offering advice on teaching K-2 students in high-poverty contexts. However, when it comes to actual research and published papers, I simply did not have a ton to choose from. I did manage to find a decent amount of them, but not nearly as many as I thought I was going to. I thought I was going to have to sift through a wide variety to find my favorites, but I had to make sure to use every one I found to get a solid amount of suggestions. I found out that using “urban” instead of “high-poverty” helped me find more articles.

I was also surprised in my research about the lack of actual classroom strategies that were mentioned in the literature. Many articles focused on big overall ideologies of teachers and schools, but few of them actually discussed real methods of applying these larger concepts, like making sure students are motivated to read or expressing high expectations in the classroom. Since these applicable ideas were what I wanted to include in my article, that meant my finished product ultimately still does not have the “meat” that I really wish it could have had. Some articles did pleasantly surprise me, however with lots of good tips and ideas to apply to the classroom that I had never even heard before in my schooling. Interestingly (and pleasantly, I might add), most of the ideas that I came across were suggestions that I had heard during my time here at UP in my education classes. That made me feel good.

When I had gleaned my tips from all of my sources, I then had to make the actual document itself with all of that information. I began with a short introduction to briefly explain what the purpose of the article was and how to navigate/use it. I decided to split up all of the tips into six sections. The first was “general pedagogy,” in which I included all of the suggestions that extended into all areas of teaching. They were ideas that should be involved in the foundation of how the classroom would operate.

The second section was titled “relationships.” I would have used the classic term “classroom management,” but in my UP classes it was brought to my attention that that phrase does not really place students in a positive light. Furthermore, all of the articles that I read all talked about the importance of building personal relationships with students, and how that was basically the foundation of why their classrooms worked and why they did not need any “classroom management” plans beyond that. When students feel cared about, they do not need to

be managed. Therefore, in this part I included different tips to ensure that those relationships would form and thrive throughout the year.

I decided to make the third section “social skills.” Social-emotional learning is a big buzz word in education right now, and so some of the more recent articles talked about how to help students develop these awarenesses. For students in high-poverty situations, which typically coincides with early trauma as well, their parents might not be exposing them to healthy ways to deal with their emotions, or to even name their emotions at all. Therefore, teachers in these schools need to take it upon themselves to explicitly instruct students on how to be a respectful, healthy member of society. They need to learn how to identify feelings in themselves and others, and how to work through those scenarios.

The last three sections were literacy, science, and mathematics, which are obviously all specific subjects. The literacy part is much longer than science and mathematics because the literature that I found was mostly about reading or other related activities. Learning literacy in these early grades is immensely important, so that is likely the reason for the focus. It was cool to find a lot of ideas to enact in the classroom to help children develop in this way; I especially liked one article that I read in which teachers changed the names of class jobs throughout the year to increase students’ vocabularies, like moving from something like “pet feeder” to “animal nutrition specialist” or something like that. I debated moving some of the science information to the “general pedagogy” section, since at UP we learned that the best way to structure the classroom is using science as the catalyst for all other subjects. Some of the literature suggested the same thing, but I figured it was best to keep all of the science stuff together so that it would not get confusing.

When it came to the tips themselves, I specifically worded each of them to begin with a verb. This deliberate decision makes all of them actions to the reader. So, they can become items to check off a to-do list, making them accessible and therefore effective, instead of just being general and wishy-washy ideas for improvement. I also specifically used second person language in the article, speaking directly to educators themselves to make it more personable and straightforward. Furthermore, although it is not technically perfect APA form, I purposefully added the source of the tip at the end of each whole bullet point. I wanted readers to not be bogged down by having to read through those annoying citations, but still easily see where they information came from and what they would need to access if they wanted to learn more about it. Some of the tips I quoted verbatim from a source, others I added to quotes from texts to make them more applicable, and others I rewrote the essence of what the source said in my own words.

I also intentionally left out the reasoning behind each tip, only occasionally including any resemblance of a “why”. This information, to me, would only weigh down the article. If the reader wants to know the specific benefits, they can consult the actual document that the information came from. To me, they have come to this article to get the applicable strategies, and they can trust that they will have good outcomes in their classroom without having to sift through all of the reported benefits while trying to just see what they, as teachers, need to do.

Overall, I am happy with how the document turned out. I gathered a lot of good information for teachers out there. However, some of the points that I found in the literature were still pretty broad. There were not as many specific tips as I had hoped I would find that would be easy to apply in classrooms. I think in the future, I could definitely do more research and add to the document with more tips that I find that are included in articles that are not just limited to

high-poverty contexts. Obviously, for a lot of strategies and research, anything written about teaching in general would be beneficial in any classroom. I was not exposed to the likely large amount of writing that has been published about simple, good pedagogy. There are some things that I have learned in my classes at UP that I could add in that I know a lot of educators out there are not aware of, but that are incredibly helpful tools to increasing student success, as well.